Fielding Transformative Notes

Harold Dent said, about fifty years ago, that it is not enough to teach about democracy; you have instead to enact it in the daily exchanges of life in school and classrooms (see Rudduck, 1999). We have identified aspects of the process of consulting students - or the process of developing frameworks for consulting students in schools - and we are focusing in this paper on the power issues that could limit the democratising potential of student voice.

The key issue is whose voice can be heard in the acoustic of the school, and by whom. Moreover, how *what is said* gets *heard* depends not only on who says it, but also on style and language.

Mitra describes an American school where there was a working group of student researchers; progress was difficult because the more middle class students already spoke the language of management and the working class students felt they could not compete with a language which they recognised as the language of the establishment through which they themselves were managed and sometimes subjugated. The important point is that consultation processes can sometimes reflect rather than challenge the existing dividing practices in school and the systems for valuing some students above others.

There are many silent or silenced voices - students who would like to say things about teaching and learning but who don't feel able to without a framework that legitimates comment and provides reassurance that teachers will welcome their comments and not retaliate

What students have to say about teaching and learning may be feared as personally challenging or as threatening to the institution. A strategy of the fearful is to limit student comment to aspects of school life which are seen as relatively safe or which do not have significant impact on the work of adults within the school, such as uniform, school meals or the colour of the classroom walls, but where *do* students talk about injustices that they experience or observe in the classroom and which they do not feel they have power to act on at the time?

teachers are moving from what some will have experienced as an us/them situation to one in which they are building a new kind of partnership in learning, what Michael Fielding has earlier called 'a radical collegiality'. But while these anxieties are understandable, Ben Levin (1999) has pointed out that the fear of students as 'revolutionaries', bent on undermining the system, is unfounded: most students' wishes he says, are 'modest, even timid. They do not seek to overthrow the system, or even to control it. They do, however, want to understand why things are done as they are. They would like to be able to voice their views about change and have them heard. They wish to have some more choice about how and what they learn'. These are all reasonable expectations. And, importantly, students want to be able to find and speak in their own voice:

Importantly, we have to ask whether the topics 'permitted' for discussion with the students in schools are ones that *they* see as significant and whether the discussions are occasions for genuine dialogue in which students can speak, without fear of retaliation, of concerns, passions and interests which are rooted in their developing sense of justice and of self.

.

As Reay and Arnot have said (2002), 'There is no homogenous pupil voice even in a single working group but rather a cacophony of competing voices'.   
  
Moreover, initiatives that seek student opinion on matters identified, framed and articulated by researchers or teachers and that do not lead to recognisable action, or discussion of possible courses of action, are unlikely to sustain their significance for students. They will soon tire of an increasing number of invitations (a) to express a view on matters they do not think are important, (b) are framed in a language they find restrictive, alienating or patronising, and (c) that seldom result in actions or dialogue that affects the quality of their lives. As Fielding and Pieto (2001) have said, 'we ... regard it as crucial for student perceptions and recommendations to be responded to, not merely treated as minor footnotes in an unaltered adult text'.

Accommodation occurs when challenging ideas are modified so that they conform to and do not disturb the existing orthodoxy

Accumulation is not something that we have directly experienced: consultation works through deepening our understanding of marginalised groups, one of the possible consequences is that we could, if we so wished, use this information and understanding to exercise greater control over them.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Tokenism | Children seem to have a voice but have little or no choice in the subject or style of communication and no time to formulate their own opinions. |
| Decoration | Children used to promote a cause but have no involvement in organising the occasion. |
| Manipulation | Adults consciously use children’s voices to carry their own message. |

A more democratic approach to consultation would be characterised by agenda setting that is collaborative, by the involvement of students in the design of the research project (if research is appropriate); by discussion of methods of collecting information, and by the production of collective research knowledge. One indication of success would be the degree to which the solidarity of the group and its capacity to confront problems constructively is enhanced by the work

As teachers who are working in traditional school cultures are finding, they have to start building their new 'community of learners' by working in a small-scale and relatively protected way with a few students who, once they gain in confidence, are often invited to 'display' their capacities for constructive analytic dialogue to other teachers, to the senior management team and even to governors and to conferences of teachers in other settings.

Ivor Goodson observed that it was dangerous to believe 'that merely by allowing people to "narrate" that we in any serious way give them voice and agency’. Transformation requires an interruption to the regularities of school life - a rupturing of the ordinary - that enables teachers and students to 'see' alternatives; and it requires, ultimately, a coherent institutional commitment: '(It) will not happen by accident goodwill or establishing *ad hoc* projects. (It) requires new structures, new activities and the rethinking of the internal workings of each institution. It is a question of getting into a new perspective, the taken for granted regimes of school, the familiar patterns of relationship and the habits of thought and values that they embody'. (Watson and Fullan, 1992)

) Children's learning can never be properly supported if teachers cannot find time to listen to them.

We would claim that it can offer:

* A stronger sense of membership (the organisational dimension) so that students feel more positive about school;
* A stronger sense of respect and self-worth (the personal dimension) so that students feel positive about themselves;
* A stronger sense of self as learner (the pedagogic dimension) so that students are better able to manage their own progress in learning;
* A stronger sense of agency (the political dimension) so that students realise that they can have impact on things that matter to them in school.

In the last twenty years or so, schools have changed less than young people have changed and schools need to reflect the different capabilities of this new generation of young people. The young people in our schools today are 'the first generation to have experienced, from their infancy, what Lyotard (1984) calls "computerisation of society" ' (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). Called the Y Generation, they are said to have more money to spend, more opportunities for self-expression and the creation of different identities. Many seem to live the important parts of their lives out of school. It is not surprising therefore to hear comments like Nieto's from the US (date), 'educating students today is a far different and more complex proposition than it has been in the past'. We need a better fit between schools and students. And we need to respond to the repeated call from students for more responsibility, more opportunities to contribute to decision-making, more opportunities for dialogue about learning and the conditions of learning.

Look Up

Fielding, M. (1999) Radical collegiality: affirming teaching as an inclusive professional practice, *Australian Educational Researcher*, 26,2,1-34.

Fielding, M. (2002) Transforamtive approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities, paper given at the BERA annual conference, University of Exeter.

Fielding, M. and Rudduck, J. (2002) The transformative potential of student voice: confronting the power issues, paper given at the BERA annual conference, University of Exeter.

Mitra, D. (2001) Opening the Floodgates: giving students a voice in school reform, *Forum*, 43,2,91-94.

Nieto, S. (1994)lessons from students on creating a chance to dream, Harvard Educational Review, 64,4,392-426.

Shultz, J. and Cook-Sather, A. 2001) *In Our Own Words: Studnets’ Perspectives on School,* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.